DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 078 RC 021 348

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TITLE An Initial Exploration of the Navajo Nation's Language and Culture Initiative.

PUB DATE 1997-00-00

NOTE 10p.; In: Teaching Indigenous Languages; see RC 021 328.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS American Indian Culture; American Indian Education; Bilingual Education; Community Attitudes; Cultural Education; Cultural Maintenance; *Educational Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; *Language Attitudes; *Native Language Instruction; *Navajo; *Navajo (Nation); Questionnaires; Surveys

ABSTRACT

This paper presents some preliminary findings from an opinion survey on the nature and depth of language and cultural studies to be included in school curricula as required by the Navajo Tribe's Language and Culture Mandate (1984). A 10-question survey was sent to 20 elementary and secondary schools in the Navajo Nation in New Mexico and Arizona. In addition, 21 attendees of the Navajo Studies Conference in Albuquerque participated in the survey. The 37 respondents included community members and teachers ranging in age from 14 to over 65. Respondents felt that Navajo or tribal elders should teach Navajo language and culture and that language arts and social studies were the top choices for curriculum expansion. Sixty-two percent felt that daily instruction was necessary and that students should be competent or fluent in Navajo. Most participants felt that parental/clan involvement was necessary and that parents should be taught Navajo language and culture so they could support and teach their children. They also felt that religion and ceremonial instruction were best taught outside of school. Although the survey showed that members of the Navajo nation are very concerned with the education of their children, opinions on the means and goals of education are not consistently shared. An appendix includes the survey questionnaire. (SAS)

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An Initial Exploration of the Navajo Nation's Language and Culture Initiative

Ann Batchelder and Sherry Markel

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This paper describes the results of a survey of attitudes about the implementation of the Navajo Tribe's mandate to teach Navajo language and culture in all schools in the Navajo Nation. The survey indicated there was widespread support for teaching Navajo language and culture in schools and that they should be infused throughout the curriculum. Though many concerns were voiced, respondents were very consistent in stating that religious and ceremonial instruction were best left to be taught outside the school.

Curriculum in elementary and secondary schools has traditionally been the means through which school districts help student develop the knowledge, skills, and responsibilities that are necessary for becoming contributing members of communities and societies (Armento, 1986). Historian K. Tsianina Lomawaima asks the question, "Can we expect Indian children to 'succeed' in school as long as Indian history, cultures, and people are systematically excluded from, marginalized within, or brutalized by curricular content? (1995, p. 341). The Navajo tribe answered that question in 1984 when they mandated the addition of instruction in Navajo language and culture to the existing curriculum in elementary and secondary schools on the Navajo Reservation.

There has long been a concern that Navajo children are losing contact with traditional Navajo culture, beliefs, and language. Crawford (1996) points out that in the mid-1970's ninety-five percent of all children entering bilingual education programs in Rough Rock and Rock Point schools were fluent Navajo speakers. Currently, statistics at those schools show that only about half the students are Navajo speakers.

Public Law 101-477, the Native American Languages Act, made it clear that "traditional languages of Native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities" and form the basis for cultural transmission and survival. The law goes on to say that there "is convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity is [sic] clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child or student." The 1991 Final Report of the U.S. Secretary of Education's Indian Nations At-Risk Task Force also acknowledged that language is essential for cultural survival, and adds that a critical goal for the education of Native American students is to develop "civic, social, creative, and critical thinking skills necessary for ethical, moral, and responsible citizenship" (INARTF, Goal 5).

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As part of a larger study that will examine the changes in elementary and secondary school curriculum under the Navajo Tribe's Language and Culture Mandate, a preliminary survey involving members of the Navajo Nation in both New Mexico and Arizona was conducted. The survey asked respondents to reflect on the nature and depth of language and cultural studies that should be a part of school curriculum. The survey focused on several key aspects of language and culture instruction in schools:

- What components of language and culture should be taught in schools? At what grade levels?
- What is the best way to teach language and/or culture to students? Who should carry out,instruction?
- How should existing curriculum be redesigned/added to for students to receive the best instruction in Navajo language and culture?
- What levels of language proficiency should be expected of students?

The responses to these questions are critical in understanding how the Navajo Nation, and individual communities within it, will approach the addition of their language and culture to school curriculum. As Burnaby (1996) notes, the support of the community is necessary for programs to be successful. Curriculum development, revision, and adoption are never simple processes. Because the future of the Navajo Nation and its citizens is tied up in the implementation of this new mandate, the process becomes even more sensitive.

Description of the study

A ten question survey (see Appendix) was mailed with a cover letter inviting participation in the survey to twenty elementary and secondary schools across the Navajo Nation. In addition, twenty-one attendees of the Navajo Studies Conference in Albuquerque participated in the survey. A sheet attached to each survey asked participants to give some demographic information about themselves. Information gathered through these demographic sheets indicated that the 37 survey respondents represented a broad geographical sample that included community members and teachers ranging in age from fourteen to over sixty-five, with the largest percentage of respondents in the range of twenty-five to forty-five years of age. Communities represented included Aztec, Beclabito, Rough Rock, Tohatchee, Ft. Defiance, Steamboat, Kayenta, Church Rock, Oak Springs, Nakaibeto, Crystal, Farmington, and Albuquerque.

Of the ten questions on the survey, five were open ended, requiring the respondent to identify and write about issues of concern. The other five questions were limited choice options with directions to circle the responses that they deemed appropriate. Participant were asked about: 1) How should language and culture instruction be integrated into the existing curriculum; 2) How often should language and culture be taught; 3) Who should be responsible for instruction; 4) What level of language competence was desired; 5) What aspects of culture should or should not be taught in schools; 6) Where should

support for programs come from; 7) What should the goals of language and culture instruction be; and 8) What concerns about language and culture instruction should be voiced?

Survey results

As Burnaby (1996), Paulston (1986), and others (Assembly of first Nations, 1990; Leap, 1981) suggest, when language and culture are in the process of shifting, people tend to take passionate stances about their beliefs, and polarized views on beliefs and practices are voiced. The administration of this survey, especially at the Navajo Studies Conference in Albuquerque, support these notions. Participants at the Conference took the initiative to discuss their views as they were filling out the survey. Many people waited patiently for a hand microphone to be passed to them so that they could relate personal experiences or concerns about the place of Navajo language and culture instruction in schools. The following five samples of unsolicited comments taken from participants at that conference seem to highlight the range of emotions and concerns received through both the conference attendeęs and those participants that mailed in their responses:

> The parents don't want a bilingual program. They don't want teachers to teach Navajo to their children. They don't really listen to me. The Chapter leaders and the tribal leaders should explain to parents and they'll listen to them. I know that students will comprehend more things with two languages, but I can't get parents to listen to me.
>
> —Navajo Elementary Teacher

> You want to teach the children to speak Navajo at school? I was taken away from my parents by the sheriff when I was five years old. They came in a car and took me away. My father said I had to go with them. They put me in a boarding school, and I was not allowed to speak Navajo. If we did, we were punished. It was hard for me, it was so hard. We girls, we would whisper in the dormitory, and if they caught us speaking Navajo, they would wash our mouths out with soap. I did not teach my sons Navajo. I did not want them to go through that. It was awful. English is the language to get ahead. I taught them English. Now, my oldest is trying to learn Navajo, and it is very hard for him. You got to teach the parents now. They're the ones that are going to have to learn so they can teach their children. You are going to have adult education, not just children in the schools.
>
> —Navajo Community Member

> Thank you for doing this. This is very important. I have taught at both Window Rock and Ganado. At Window Rock many of my students spoke and understood Navajo. But I think that this is because they were all there. They lived there. No busses. At Ganado it was the other way around. Everybody was bussed. They were all on the road. They didn't get Navajo all

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> the time and most of them don't understand it well. Everybody spoke Navajo until the Head Start came in. After that, about five years after that, that's when Navajo began to disappear.
>
> —Navajo Community Member and Teacher

> I've been a missionary for thirty-five years in the Checkerboard area. No one spoke English when I first got there. Now it is very typical for someone to ask a question in Navajo and have the answer come back in English. It makes me sick to my stomach that the language is going. Somebody has to stop this!
>
> —Missionary

> I am Hispanic, and I didn't learn Spanish until college. Do you know how hard that was to learn Spanish in college? This ends up being reteaching, and it takes much longer....I urge you to teach your children Navajo in the home and in the school. You will lose it if you don't. I teach preschool, and there are only five Navajo monolingual students in my class. There are another four or five children who may be bilingual; they respond to my questions in both Navajo and English. The rest of the students don't understand any Navajo at all. Are we just lazy? English is the language of success according to parents. We must teach teachers to speak in Navajo during the school day.
>
> —Reservation Pre-School Teacher

As the comments above illustrate, and the results of the survey back up, participants in this study did not always agree on the place of Navajo language and culture instruction in elementary and secondary schools.

Respondents were given choices as to who should teach Navajo language and culture were provided as seen Figure 1 below. They indicated that "Navajo" was the best choice and the next highest choice was "tribal elder." Separating out the surveys completed in Albuquerque from those sent in from school districts showed some interesting differences in preference. Mailed responses indicated that it was important that a community member be responsible for instruction, though that person did not necessarily have to be an elder. The Albuquerque surveys included higher numbers of responses indicating a classroom teacher, regardless of background, should be the person responsible for instruction in Navajo language and culture.

As can be seen in Figure 2, every content area listed on the survey had votes for placement of Navajo language and cultural studies. However, language arts and social studies were the two most highly selected areas of study for curriculum expansion. Science and physical education received the least responses, while thirteen percent of respondents felt that Navajo language and culture studies should be infused in every class taught in schools. Sixty-two percent of the respondents felt that regardless of where Navajo language and culture were included in the curriculum, daily instruction was necessary.

Figure 1: Who should teach Navajo language and culture

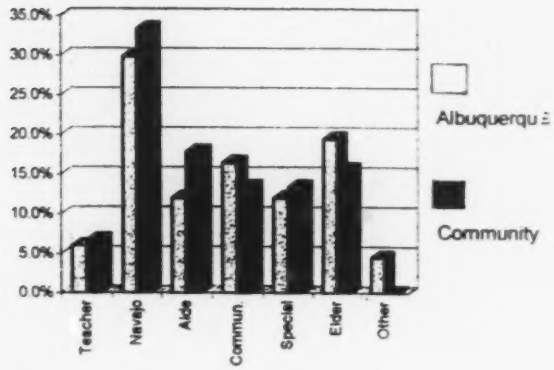
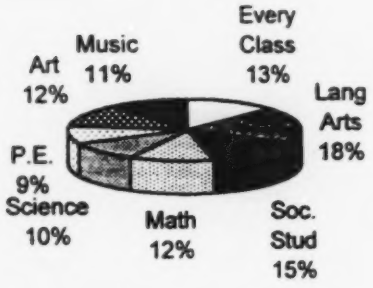


Figure 2: Classes to include language and culture instruction



Respondents were almost equally divided among the three levels of Navajo language competence desired in students. Twenty-four percent desired the basics (an introduction to basic vocabulary), 32% competency (the ability to carry on conversations in Navajo), and 44% fluency (the ability to use Navajo for all communication processes). It is striking that sixty-seven percent of the respondents felt that students should be competent or fluent in Navajo. Again, there were differences in the mailed and conference responses. Mailed responses had much more support for basic and competent levels of fluency, while con-

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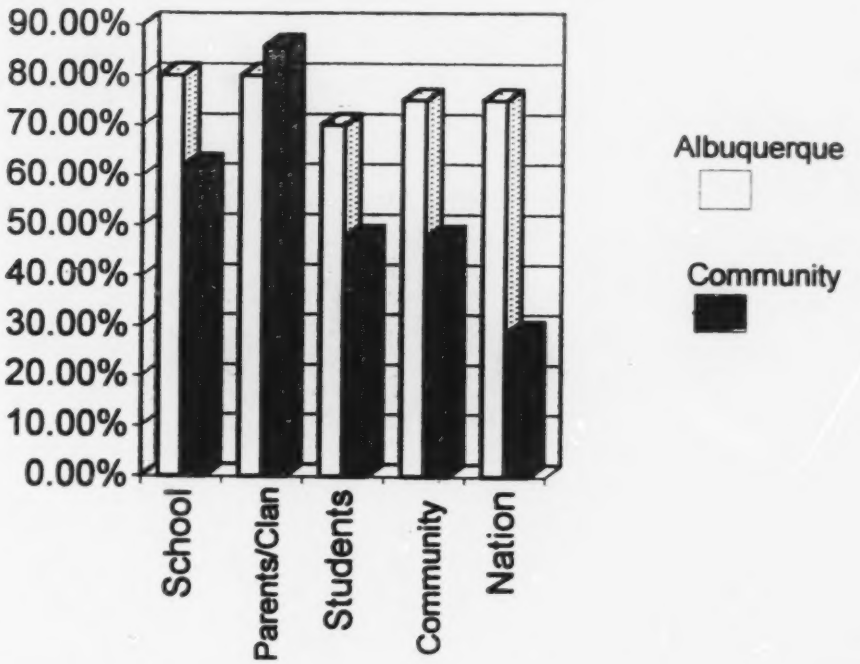
ference members were more likely to choose the competent or fluent categories.

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed a desire for parental/clan involvement with instruction, followed by community member involvement as can be seen in Figure 3 below. Several respondents urged that parents should be taught Navajo language and culture so that they could support and teach their children within the family. Participants who spoke out at the Albuquerque conference made claims that through the efforts of boarding schools to teach English-only, a generation of language and culture had already been lost. This generation includes both parents and grandparents of today's students, and these people could benefit from instruction as much as the children.

Figure 3: Who should be involved in Navajo language and culture instruction



Concerns and conclusions

Though many concerns were voiced, respondents were very consistent in agreement that some components of Navajo culture did not belong in schools. Religious and ceremonial instruction were mentioned time after time as areas that were best left to those outside the school to teach. Another concern mentioned several times was who would decide the credentials of those chosen to be instructors in language and culture. Would it mean that all teachers had to be certified in their language skills and cultural knowledge or could just anyone volunteer to be an instructor?

The results presented here are some preliminary findings from a survey circulated across the Navajo Nation. Communities are continuing to send in responses. What is very clear from the data that has been gathered so far is that members of the Navajo Nation are very concerned with the education of their children, though the means and goals for instruction of Navajo language and culture are not consistently shared across all communities. How the mandate impacts each community and the entire Navajo Nation is not yet clear, but if the voices we heard through the participants in this study are any indication, support for teaching Navajo language is widespread.

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Appendix

Cultural Indexes: Navajo Voices on Language and Cultural instruction in Schools

1. Does instruction of Navajo Language have a place in schools?

_____ yes _____ no

If so where? (Circle as many options below as you think appropriate)

- as part of every class

or

- as part of specific classes
  - Language Arts
  - Social Studies
  - Math
  - Science
  - P.E.
  - Art
  - Music

2. How often should Navajo Language and Culture be taught?
   - Daily for _____ (amount of time)
   - 3 times a week for _____
   - 2 times a week for _____
   - Once a week for _____
3. Who should be teaching Navajo Language and Culture?
   - Classroom teacher regardless of background
   - Navajo
   - Aide
   - Community Member
   - Special Instructor
   - Tribal Elder
   - Other _____
4. Level of language competence desired:
   - Fluency
   - Competence
   - Basics
5. Aspects of culture to be included in instruction:
   - Specifics _____
   - At what grade levels? _____
   - To what extent? _____
6. Are there any components of Navajo culture that shouldn't be part of school based instruction?

_____

_____

7. Who should be involved in teaching Navajo Language and Culture? (circle as many options as you think are appropriate)

- School
- Parents, clans, and/or extended family
- Students Community
- Nation

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8. This initiative will require support. Where should this support come from? (note type- monetary, resources, time, people)

- School - _____
- Community - _____
- Parents/family - _____
- Students - _____
- Nation - _____
- Federal Government - _____

9. What do you think should be the goals of the Language and Culture initiative?

Immediate: _____

_____

One year: _____

_____

Five Year: _____

_____

Extended: _____

_____

10. Do you have any concerns about Navajo Language and Culture being taught in schools?

_____

_____

_____

Please answer the following demographic information questions.

Profession: _____

If you are affiliated with a school system, please check one:

_____ Public School
_____ BIA School
_____ Contract School
_____ Private School
_____ Religious School

Home Community: _____

Age:

(Under 20) _____
(20-25) _____
(25-35) _____
(36-45) _____
(46-55) _____
(56-65) _____
(Over 65) _____

Gender:

_____ Male _____ Female

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